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UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

Home College Series.

Number ❋ *Twenty-One.*

WM. HICKLING PRESCOTT.

BY

DANIEL WISE, D.D.

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THE "HOME COLLEGE SERIES" will contain one hundred short papers on a wide range of subjects—biographical, historical, scientific, literary, domestic, political, and religious. Indeed, the religious tone will characterize all of them. They are written for every body—for all whose leisure is limited, but who desire to use the minutes for the enrichment of life.

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And what a young man may do in this respect, a young woman, and both old men and old women, may do.

J. H. VINCENT.

NEW YORK, *Jan.*, 1883.

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WILLIAM H. PRESCOTT.

William Hickling Prescott, the charming historian of Mexico, Peru, etc., was born in Salem, Mass., on the 4th of May, 1796. His father was an eminent lawyer, descended from a line of hardy yeoman of good Puritan blood. His mother was the daughter of a highly respected Boston merchant. Both parents were persons of superior character. Their home was the abode of that refinement which comes from intellectual culture, and of that domestic bliss which is the effluence of mutual marital affection, paternal dignity and gentleness, maternal energy, cheerfulness, and love, "controlled by good sense and by religious convictions."

The child life of young Prescott was largely and wisely influenced by his good mother, and by Miss Mehitabel Higginson, the school-mother, as she loved to call herself, of a flock of little children placed under her care by the respectable people of Salem. He remained in her school until he was nearly seven years old, and then was sent to an establishment taught by "Master Knapp." After spending five years at this gentleman's school, he went with his parents to their new home in Boston. In that city he became a pupil of the Rev. Dr. Gardiner, rector of Trinity Church. This gentleman was a very superior classical scholar, and an instructor of exceptional ability and tact. Under his care he prepared for college, and in 1811, when he was only fifteen years old, he was admitted, after a creditable examination, to the sophomore class in Harvard University.

There was nothing in young Prescott's school life or in his intellectual development during boyhood that indicated the future historian. While in Mr. Knapp's school, though regarded as a "bright, merry boy, with an inquisitive mind,

quick perceptions, and a ready, retentive memory," he did not rank with the best scholars. He might have stood among the first if he had wished to do so. It was not for lack of ability, but for lack of purpose, that he failed. He was too fond of play and of books which addressed the imagination to give his mind to close, earnest study. He showed the same dispositions while under Dr. Gardiner's care. His prescribed lessons he prepared with apparent ease, but his teacher found it very difficult, if not impossible, to induce him to give his attention to lessons not indispensable for his admission to the university. His passion for the romances of that day still fascinated him, and his reading was not for improvement, but for idle, dreamy amusement.

It was his good fortune to be reared by parents who, while affording free scope for the gayety of his nature, were sufficiently wise to apply the restraints of discipline whenever their boy's merriment spurred him into impropriety. At such times the calm rebukes of his dignified father and the mild expostulations of his affectionate mother were effectual in preventing a repetition of his offenses. His conscience was quick to respond to their censures. One evening, after one of his boyish peccadilloes, his mother bade him read aloud one of Dr. Channing's sermons to children. He had not read more than a few pages when, with tears in his eyes and a voice choking with emotion, he looked into his mother's face and said :

"Mother, if I am ever a bad boy again, wont you set me to reading that sermon ?"

Two facts in his boy life gave slight indications of his subsequently developed power as a writer of history. He took inexhaustible delight in games of battles and knightly conflicts described in his school-books and in romances; these he and his companions fought over and over again, at first with mimic armies made of paper, and later in mock personal encounters. He and his chosen school friend, William

Gardiner, were also in the habit of improvising stories for mutual entertainment. Such employments are not characteristic of boys generally, and may, therefore, be regarded as incipient tendencies toward that bent of his mind to graphic descriptions and historical composition which afterward made his name famous in the world of letters.

The freedom from the constraints of home life, which is given to a youth when he enters college, is often a severe test of his moral strength. With freedom is associated companionship which, particularly to one naturally gay and genial as was young Prescott, are not seldom temptations to hitherto-unknown pleasures more or less vicious. That he yielded somewhat to the fascinations of his new life Mr. Ticknor, his biographer, reluctantly confesses when he says that his standard of character "sometimes was not so high on the score of morals as it should have been." Precisely what this admission means is not clear; but it is known that he plunged into no excesses which involved him in censure for violating college rules. A strong will kept him within certain bounds, but that will, not being guided by the law of Christ, did not keep him from venturing into slippery places. He made many good resolutions, but, after resolving and re-resolving, remained the same as before, and put some acts into his life which he subsequently reviewed with regret.

What this moral weakness might have effected in his character cannot now be known, because of a singular misfortune which struck him, as with a flash of lightning, and changed the current of his being and life. It occurred as he was passing out of Common's Hall one day after dinner. Hearing a noise, caused by some frolicsome students behind him, he looked back to see what was going on. Instantly a piece of hard bread, thrown at random by a thoughtless lad, struck the disk of the left eye, which, so sudden was the coming of the missile, did not protect itself by instinctively

closing its lid. Prescott fell as if shot. Though his mind remained clear, his body was completely prostrated. Sick at the stomach, with a feeble pulse, his face "pale and shrunken," he was borne by gentle arms to his father's house in Boston. There they placed him in bed, but he was too weak to sit up. Medical aid was sought. But it could advise no treatment of the organ; nothing but absolute repose, that nature might have opportunity to do what it could for the young sufferer's relief. The retina of his eye was paralyzed. No mark was visible, but its sight was practically lost. There was reason for hoping that he might be able to resume his college studies after a time, but none that he would ever recover the use of his injured eye.

Prescott's nobility of nature showed itself in his remarkable forbearance to speak a word censuring the author of his suffering. He knew the hand which struck him, but, recognizing the lack of all intention to injure either himself or any one else, he bore his hurt in silence. In later years he did the man an important kindness. But, to the shame of the offender be it written, he was never known to express regret for the consequence of his idle but mischievous deed.

Young Prescott's forced seclusion gave him time for reflection; and when he was able to resume his college studies his character took on a more sober aspect. His spirits were as overflowing as before, but his ambitions were higher, his purposes stronger, his devotion to study more complete. In mathematics he could not excel, as he was forced to confess to the indulgent professor of that department; but in English literature and in classical studies he was so proficient that he was graduated with honor in 1814.

After quitting the academic halls of Harvard he began the study of law in his father's office; not that he loved the law, but because it was his father's wish. His own choice was literature, not law; and it was finally gratified through

events little anticipated, and which transformed a large portion of his life into almost a living martyrdom.

This new form of suffering came upon him in January, 1815, in the form of acute rheumatism of the right eye, involving severe pain and deprivation of sight. From the eye it shifted to the limbs, sometimes alternating from one to the other. During sixteen weeks he was unable to walk a step. His life was now embittered by fierce pains, inability to read, and long confinement in a darkened room. These were very sore trials to an ambitious young man of otherwise bright prospects, as he stood on the threshold of active life, but he did not repine, did not even lose his natural gayety, but was invariably cheerful and genial.

Change of climate being thought desirable, he sailed in the autumn of 1815 for St. Michael's, one of the Western Islands, to visit his maternal grandfather. There he met with a warmth of affection which gave his sensitive nature unbounded delight. The tropical wealth and beauty of the island added to his pleasures; when, alas for his hopes! the pain returned to his right eye and doomed him to the seclusion and inaction of a darkened room for three wearisome months. His unrepining, even cheerful, patience won the admiring affection of his friends. And when he left their hospitable home in April, 1816, for England, his venerable grandfather pressed him in his arms and, with many tears, exclaimed, "It never cost me more to part from any of my children!"

In London the most distinguished physicians could promise him no cure, but only alleviation of his disease. At times his eye was so far relieved as to permit him to look into a book, but only with a hopelessness which wrung tears from his eyes, and moved him to write to his loved and loving friends at home, "When I look into a Greek or Latin book I experience much the same sensation one does who looks on the face of a dead friend."

From London Prescott went to France and Italy, and while still a sufferer from his infirmities he returned to his home in Boston in the summer of 1817. At first he lived a very retired life on account of his eyes. To relieve the tedium of such a life an old school-master and his sister often read to him by turns, many hours a day, while he sat in a corner of his room with his back to the light.

It was now clear both to himself and to his friends that he could not become a lawyer. His infirmity as well as his tastes forbade him to think of becoming a merchant. What profession, then, could he choose? was the question which now perplexed him. His affluent father was both able and willing to support him, but having a praiseworthy desire to support himself, and to be of some use in society, he thought long and often of all the possibilities in his case. While this problem was puzzling him, he ventured once more into society. His fine figure, gentle bearing, handsome features, and sunny smile made him a welcome visitor in the most aristocratic circles. There he met with a lady, named Miss Susan Amory, who so captivated him that in May, 1820, he made her his bride. It is enough to say of this marriage that, writing of it years after, he said, "Contrary to the assertion of La Bruyère, who somewhere says that the most fortunate husband finds reason to regret his condition at least once in twenty-four hours, I may truly say that I have found no such day in the quarter of a century that Providence has spared us to each other." And so, says his biographer, "it continued to the last."

Having thus wisely chosen a good wife, Prescott returned to the choice of a profession. Strangely enough, as it seemed, for one little better than blind, he finally determined to devote himself to literature. But the event proved that he had properly estimated his own powers, both as to capacity and power of patient perseverance.

The story of his prodigious preparatory labors, as given

by Mr. George Ticknor, his admirable biographer, reads more like a romance than, as it is, a record of sober facts. Unable to read except now and then when his eye permitted brief use ; compelled to use the noctograph, an instrument ingeniously contrived to enable the blind to write; almost wholly dependent on a reader for his knowledge of books, one follows him with ever-increasing wonder through his manifold studies. Determined to lay his foundations deep and strong, he began with the study of the principles of grammar and composition. Next he went through the rich treasures of English literature, from Roger Ascham to the latest modern reviewer, at the same time keeping up his studies of the Latin classics. French and Italian then engaged his attention. German he failed to acquire ; but having his thoughts drawn by a mere accident to the Spanish he studied that, and became so deeply interested in its historical literature that, after much hesitation and frequent changes of purpose, he finally resolved, in 1826, that his maiden book should be a history of the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella.

He then commenced his examinations of hundreds of Spanish books, and, though often hindered by returns of acute disease in his eye, persevered until his materials were digested and his numerous notes written. These preparations consumed three years and a half, before he wrote a page of history. In October, 1829, he began the work of composition. He wrought upon it with indescribable patience more than seven years and six months. Another year was consumed in carrying it through the press, and in 1837 the product of all this toil was given to the world. It is no exaggeration to say that no other man ever produced such a history under such peculiar disadvantages as those which hampered the author of the masterly and fascinating history of Ferdinand and Isabella.

Such was Prescott's modest estimate of his work when it lay finished on his table, that he at first hesitated to give it

to the public. But after sending its proofs to a few competent critics whose judgment he highly esteemed, he arranged for its publication. It needs scarcely be added that it met with high, even enthusiastic, approval, not only among his personal friends in Boston, where, as Dr. Channing told him, it was "received with acclamation," but also throughout the country. Distinguished men in England also awarded it the highest praise. Bentley, after a brief delay, published it in London; and on the continent of Europe the most competent critics pronounced it worthy of high rank among the best historical productions of the times. Thus his long, arduous, unparalleled labors were rewarded with a world-wide recognition of his great abilities as a historian. His work had made him a celebrity. The voice of his sudden fame afforded him pleasure, but, as he wrote to his friend Ticknor, "the delight of his good father" and the heartiness of his personal friends were even then the two things from which he "derived unfeigned satisfaction."

A period of hesitation followed. "What shall be the subject of my next work?" was the question which held his eloquent pen in abeyance for some time. He was waiting to see if the fame of his published volumes was destined to be ephemeral or lasting. When satisfied that his work would live he resolved that the "Conquest of Mexico" should next engage his thoughts. Then, in 1838, he began to lay broad foundations for his proposed structure. But it was not until the spring of 1839 that he bent his best energies to his task. In that year he wrote, "I have begun to lay my bones to the work in good earnest." The first result of this application was that after a faithful and laborious examination of an immense number of authorities, he was able to commence its composition in October, 1839.

He had at this time more ability to use his eye than when working on Ferdinand and Isabella. This was, of course, a great advantage. Yet he had hinderances not heretofore

encountered. His fame had brought him into correspondence with numerous important personages in the literary world, both at home and abroad; and this, though pleasing in itself, involved a heavy tax on his time and strength. More serious still was a necessity laid upon him to prepare an abridgment of his former volumes, because of a threat from certain ungenerous publishers to have such a piratical work written. This threat was never fulfilled. Hence his own abridgment was not published, albeit the time spent upon it was a vexatious hinderance to the work in hand.

Still this indefatigable invalid held himself steadfastly to his task. In August, 1843, it was completed. It had cost him five years of labor, which, though somewhat inconstant at first, was so incessant at last, that on throwing down his pen he wrote, "The last two years have been the most industrious of my life, I think—especially the last year—and, as I have won the capital, entitle me to three months of literary loafing."

The fame he had already won caused his "Conquest of Mexico" to be greeted with a chorus of applause such, says Mr. Ticknor, "as was never vouchsafed to any other work of equal gravity and importance that had been printed or reprinted among us." Its sale was remarkable, both at home and abroad. Critics on both sides of the Atlantic gave it unstinted praise, and this patient writer, under difficulties such as would have led most men similarly situated to live an idle life, found himself more famous than before. He was pleased, but not puffed up, with his great reputation, as appears from these words written to a friend: "It is somewhat enervating and has rather an unwholesome effect to *potter* long over these personalities. The best course is action—things, not self—at all events not self-congratulation. So now I propose to dismiss all further thoughts of my literary success."

He now indulged himself with a brief but hard-earned

literary holiday, after which he began his preparation for his "Conquest of Peru," which he determined should be his next contribution to the literature of history. In August, 1844, he was ready to begin its composition, but shrank as usual from entering upon it, saying, "I find it very difficult to screw up my wits to the historic pitch; so much for the vagabond life I have been leading; and breaking ground on a new subject is always a dreary business." After writing two chapters he said, "I never found it so hard to come to the starting-point. The first chapter was a perfectly painful task, as painful as I ever performed at school." Nevertheless, he resolutely pursued his self-appointed task, until in December, 1844, he was shocked by the almost instantaneous death of his noble father. Two sad months of devotion to duties growing out of this painful event intervened; and then, with an abiding though tranquil grief in his heart, he resumed his labors. Academic honors from the learned societies of France and Germany came to cheer him, but his pleasure in these recognitions of his ability was chastened by the fact that his father was no longer living to share his satisfaction. He could say with Montaigne, on the death of Boëtie, "We had every thing in common, and now that he is gone I feel as if I had no right to his part." Viewing him bowed down beneath this great sorrow, one scarcely knows which to admire most, the brilliancy of his genius or the beauty and tenderness of his filial affection.

Once again at his task of composition he worked fully up to the limit of his power when, in the spring of 1846, his speed was checked by a strain of the nerve in his eye. And then his work progressed, no longer at race-horse, but snail-like, speed. He was disheartened. "It takes the strength out of me," he said in a melancholy mood. Nevertheless, he regained his courage, resting when unable to proceed, and when re-invigorated by brief repose returning to his burdensome, yet congenial, task. At last, in March, 1847, the goal

was reached. Two years and nine months from the time he began its writing his "History of Peru" issued from the press of the Harpers to abide the verdict of the great republic of letters.

Prescott had his misgivings as to the character of that verdict. What author, however assured his reputation, ever sent his book into the world without more or less anxiety as to its reception? But Prescott's fears were soon relieved by the immense success of his volumes. As with his previous works so with this. Reviewers in America and Europe set their broad seal of unqualified approval upon it; the public bought it with avidity on both sides of the ocean; and our author had every possible reason for satisfaction. He had given the world a work of high merit and real value, and its worth had been universally recognized both by general readers and by the best and most critical minds of the age.

In the Preface to his "History of Peru," Prescott, owing to the many incorrect statements concerning his eye which had been given to the public, inserted a brief account of the simple facts. He wishes his readers, he says, "to understand the real extent of my embarrassments in my historical pursuits. That they have not been very light will be readily admitted, when it is consideredthat I have had but a limited use of my eye in its best state, and that much of the time I have been debarred from the use of it altogether. Yet the difficulties I have had to contend with are very far inferior to those which fall to the lot of a blind man. I know of no historian now alive who can claim the glory of having overcome such obstacles but the author of 'La Conquête de l'Angleterre par les Normands,' who, to use his own touching and beautiful language, 'has made himself the friend of darkness;' and who, to a profound philosophy that requires no light but that from within, unites a capacity for extensive and varied research that might well demand the severest application of the student.

"The remarks into which I have been led will, I trust, not be set down by the reader to an unworthy egotism, but to their true source, a desire to correct a misapprehension to which I may have unintentionally given rise myself, and which has gained me the credit with some—far from grateful to my feelings, since undeserved—of having surmounted the incalculable obstacles which lie in the path of the blind man."

The reader of Prescott's memoir scarcely knows whether most to admire the modesty, the humility, the manliness, or the strict regard for exact truthfulness manifest in these gracefully written and touching paragraphs. In them the historian unconsciously illustrates that nice sense of honor which was such a marked feature in his fine character.

The "Reign of Philip the Second" was his next great undertaking. His old reluctance to begin a new book held him like the spell of a magician in a state of hesitation for some time. New embarrassments also threw their shadows over his elastic spirit. His only available eye was growing worse, could only be used for reading an hour a day, and that at intervals, and there was no hope that it would ever improve, since the decay of the strained nerve was apparent. Moreover, his general health began to show the effects of the severe strain which his past labors had put upon it. Nevertheless, he finally resolved to make Philip his theme, began and completed his preparations on his usual exhaustive method, and entered resolutely upon the more congenial task of composition, when dyspepsia and other ailments set in with such force as to compel him to quit all literary work and to seek recuperation in traveling and in a temporary change of climate. Hence, in the spring of 1850, he sailed for England.

His reception in England was more cordial than his native modesty could have suffered him to dream. The intellect of the fatherland—its best blood, its highest dignitaries,

from the Queen downward—honored him with courteous attentions, with cordial, and in many cases affectionate, intercourse. His visit, including a trip to Paris, Brussels, and Antwerp, passed in "unbroken enjoyment." "It was," says Mr. Ticknor, "the most brilliant visit ever made to England by an American citizen not clothed with the *prestige* of official station." Better still, however, were its effects on his health, which was sufficiently improved to permit him, after his return, to push his "Philip" so far toward completion as to publish its first and second volumes in November, 1855. He did this in spite of grief caused by the sudden death of his greatly beloved mother in May, 1852, and of increasingly severe attacks of rheumatism. The composition of these two volumes cost him the labor of five years, deducting the six months spent in England. Like his preceding works, it met with immediate and gratifying success. With undiminished courage, which new and increasing infirmities could not daunt, he continued his as yet unfinished task, until, in April, 1858, he sent the third volume to press. Preparations for a fourth volume next occupied his thoughts. On the 28th of January, 1859, he talked to his friends of his fixed purpose to proceed with it vigorously. And then, after conversing with his secretary respecting the name of an official personage which neither of them could recall, he went to his wife and sister, who were in another room, to see if they could recollect it. To his surprise his wife, who was not usually much interested in public affairs, gave him the desired name. Laughing with his characteristic merry laugh, he snapped his fingers at her and said, "How came *you* to remember?" and left the room.

He had about a year before been seized with a mild stroke of apoplexy. When he parted so cheerfully with his wife on this fatal morning, none could perceive any sign that this old enemy was at his side. But it was even so; and a few minutes later, his secretary, hearing him groan, rushed

into his apartment and found him unconscious. Apoplexy had again touched his brain, and this time with fatal effect. After three hours of unconsciousness the great historian passed into the silent land.

Mr. Prescott's histories are models of style. When Hallam, himself no mean historian, wrote to him, "Your style appears to me to be nearly perfect," he only gave fit expression to the general opinion of competent critics. "The style is the man," says a commonly accepted adage, and it is in no case more remarkably illustrated than in Prescott. The peculiar circumstances under which he wrote compelled a degree of painstaking, both as to facts and expression, which insured strength, clearness, and correctness. The uncertainty inseparable from gaining knowledge chiefly by hearing moved him to almost unparalleled efforts to avoid mistakes. And those efforts, by requiring the utmost concentration of which his mind was capable, made the events he recorded palpable as living realities. He saw them like visions in all their relations before he wrote of them. Hence the transparency, the force, the life of his descriptions of great historic scenes. Hence also came the extraordinary fascination of his histories. His peculiar mental processes, which led him to digest his materials and to compose his sentences in his memory before attempting to commit them to writing, brought his whole nature into such close and prolonged contact with the characters and events of which he wrote, that all his powers and feelings were aroused. His moral as well as his mental judgment found expression through his pen. Therefore it was, as Mr. Ticknor has well remarked, that "he put not a little of his personal character" into his work. And that character, being remarkable for its elevated tone, pure moral feeling, noble aspirations, generous impulses, overflowing geniality, tender sympathies, and strong affectionateness, begot in his readers a degree of that attachment which was almost uniformly begotten in

those who were favored with his personal acquaintance. To know Mr. Prescott personally was to be attracted to him. In like manner, though, of course, in a lesser degree, to be familiar with his writings is to feel a drawing toward the author such as one is rarely conscious of when perusing any other historian.

For his rare character Prescott was largely indebted to the influences of the exceptionally happy home of his early days and to nature. The latter gave him a soul which was a perennial fountain of moral sensitiveness, kindness, and cheerfulness. His affliction chastened, but did not darken, his sunniness. Among other things it led him to take more sober views of life, and to investigate the claims of the Christian religion with unusual care. The result of these latter inquiries was a conviction of its divine character and of his obligation to respect its claims. But, owing to his idiosyncrasies, and to other causes not now apparent, he could not, or at least did not, interpret it as evangelical Christians do. He believed it as he understood it; reverenced and, as one may hope, trusted in its adorable Author, and cherished a hope of happy immortality through the abounding goodness of the great All-Father. As we view revealed truth, his religious character would have gained immensely, and his spiritual enjoyments have been vastly richer and more consoling, had his faith been clearer with respect to the divine nature of man's Redeemer.

THE STUDY OF HISTORY.

"I have considered the days of old, the years of ancient times."—PSALM lxxvii, 5.

"I have read some where or other, in Dionysius of Halicarnassus, I think, that history is philosophy teaching by examples."—BOLINGBROKE.

"History, which is indeed little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind."—GIBBON.

> "In the elder days of art,
> Builders wrought with greatest care
> Each minute and unseen part;
> For the gods see every-where."—LONGFELLOW.

"Seest thou a man diligent in his business? he shall stand before kings; he shall not stand before mean men."—PROV. xxii, 29.

> "My eyes make pictures, when they are shut."—COLERIDGE.

> "Defer not till to-morrow to be wise,
> To-morrow's sun to thee may never rise."—CONGREVE.

"If thou faint in the day of adversity, thy strength is small."—PROV. xxiv, 10.

"Histories make men wise; poets, witty; the mathematics, subtile; natural philosophy, deep; moral sciences, grave; logic and rhetoric, able to contend."—BACON.

"Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord, according as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue."—1 PETER i, 2, 3.

WILLIAM H. PRESCOTT.

[THOUGHT-OUTLINE TO HELP THE MEMORY.]

1. Born? Father? Mother? "School-mother?" Further education? His standing at Mr. Knapp's school? Defects? Conscience? Literary delights?
2. Temptations at college? Accident? Treatment of the offender? Graduated? Law? New and sore affliction?
3. Change of climate? Life at St. Michael's? London? France? Italy? Boston? Marriage? Choice of profession?
4. Preparation for writing? First subject? Further preparation? Composition? Impression of book on the public? Next book? Effect? Third book? Affliction in 1844? Foreign recognition? Trouble in 1846? The "goal" in 1847?
5. Next great work? Abroad? Reception in England? Affliction in 1852? Fourth volume of last work? Death?
6. Hallam's tribute? Religious views and character?

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